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ABSTRACT

Employers' motivations for getting involved in school-to-work internships and their perceptions of the quality of work-based learning placements were examined through a telephone survey of 334 employers participating in 5 school-to-work programs (2 in New York, 2 in Pennsylvania, and 1 in Michigan) and a matching sample of 323 establishments not participating in school-to-work. The most important motivation for employer participation in school-to-work was philanthropic; however, a substantial minority of firms said self-interested motives were most important. Large firms were much more likely than smaller firms to provide internships. For-profit establishments constituted just under half the participating establishments but 90% of the comparison firms. Both participating and nonparticipating employers were much more concerned about the costs of training students than about the direct costs of paying students. Most internships provided by the five programs were in a diverse group of occupations, including health, education, and business services. Most participating firms provided a mentor and claimed to document and assess student learning on the job. On average, the internships lasted nearly 23 weeks, with students spending about 14% of their time on job learning. Public and nonprofit organizations tended to provide higher-quality internships; however, the not-for-profits have internships with the shortest learning times. (MN)

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ACHIEVING SCALE AND QUALITY IN SCHOOL-TO-WORK INTERNSHIPS: FINDINGS FROM AN EMPLOYER SURVEY

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Work-based learning is a central component of the school-to-work strategy. Yet this component is particularly difficult to build and institutionalize because it requires educators and program organizers to find appropriate settings where students can have work-based learning experiences. A widespread system of work-based learning in the form of internships or apprenticeships will need to involve thousands of employers willing to provide placements. Furthermore, those employers need to be willing to work with schools to ensure that those placements have educational value. Employers who participate reluctantly are not likely to create a positive learning environment on the job. Thus the process of employer recruitment has a strong bearing on the quality of internship placements.

In order to identify the motivations of employer participants and explore the quality of work-based learning placements, we conducted a survey of employers participating in five programs, and a survey of a comparison group of non-participating employers in those same labor markets. This report compares the characteristics of the participating employers to the nonparticipants. We also try to identify the relationship between the characteristics and motivations of employer participants and the quality of the internships that they provide. By better understanding the motivations of participants and how those relate to the quality of placements, we hope to help program operators find an adequate number of good-quality placements.

Existing research on employer participation in work-based learning falls into two broad categories. The first, which includes theoretical discussions about employer participation, tends to be somewhat pessimistic, failing to find any strong incentives for employers to participate, although noting potential reasons for them to do so (Bailey, T. R., 1995; Klein, S. G., 1995). The second type of research consists of empirical studies, most of which are case studies of school-to-work programs that include some attention to the problems of employer recruitment. These studies tend to be somewhat more optimistic, reporting that employers are happy with the experiences and indeed that the student interns usually exceed the employers' expectations. While a small number of the empirical studies raise concerns about the feasibility of widespread employer participation, other recent studies highlight programs that have been successful in recruiting and retaining employers (Lynn and Wills, 1994; Kopp and Kazis, 1995; Pedraza, Pauly, and Kopp, 1997).

This report expands our knowledge of the issue in two primary ways. First, our methodology allows a comparison between participating and nonparticipating employers. Any attempt to understand why firms participate, what the characteristics of participating firms are, and how nonparticipants might be recruited requires an investigation of both participating and nonparticipating firms. Second, previous studies have not explored the relationship between employer recruitment and program quality.

The school-to-work programs chosen for this study were ones in which students spent a significant amount of time in work-based learning outside of the classroom, because programs with internships require commitment from employer partners. The five programs are: City-as-School in New York City; Kalamazoo Education for Employment in Kalamazoo, Michigan; the cooperative education program at LaGuardia Community College in New York City; the Greater Lehigh Valley Youth Apprenticeship program in Pennsylvania; and the Philadelphia Education for Employment School-to-Careers system.

Each program contributed a list of employers participating in the program. We created a matching sample of nonparticipating establishments. The final survey was conducted by telephone from May to August of 1996. Complete responses were gathered from 334 participating employers and 323 nonparticipants.

EMPLOYER PARTICIPATION

Many firms in the United States have been providing internships, apprenticeships, and other forms of work-based learning for many years. Our survey of nonparticipants provides information that allows us to make an estimate of the participation rate in cities that we surveyed. To identify nonparticipants, we telephoned employers and asked them if they were providing or had provided internships. According to our data, almost 25 percent of employers already provide internships. However, this estimate is probably higher than a national participation rate would be, given that we selected these cities because they already had large and well-established internship programs. Still, a substantial minority of employers in these areas, especially the larger employers, are already participating in work-based learning programs.

Motivations for Participation. Why do these firms participate in school-to-work programs? We suggest three broad motivations—philanthropic, individual, and collective—and try to differentiate among these in the survey. The data suggest that the most important motivation for participation is philanthropic, although a substantial minority of firms report that self-interested motives are most important. One interpretation might be that these programs have so far been able to recruit organizations that are philosophically oriented towards public service. There is some evidence in our study that such motivations could support a reasonably large school-to-work system. Some of the programs we studied have been able to sustain large programs for many years, even though the employers report a primacy of philanthropic motivations.

Large firms are much more likely to provide internships than smaller firms, although there are still a substantial number of smaller firms that do participate. It is likely that program operators looking for placements go to the large firms first since such firms are more likely to be able to provide multiple

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placements. Does the firm size data have any implications for possible motivations? Large firms are more likely to have specialized community relations departments. Being more visible, large firms might have a stronger incentive to engage in public service activities. On the other hand, small neighborhood establishments might feel a particular commitment to working with a local school and community. Thus, firm size itself does not seem to have strong implications about motivations. Participation rates may also reflect large fixed costs for participation. Whether the motivation is self-interested or philanthropic, there are costs; and if there is a large fixed-cost component, then a large firm could more easily absorb those costs.

A more significant factor than size appears to be the type of work organization in a firm. Compared to nonparticipants, participants provide more training, are more likely to emphasize competition based on quality rather than price, tend to be more oriented towards national and international markets, and have more progressive human resource practices such as job rotation, self-managed work teams, quality circles, Total Quality Management, and profit sharing. Many of these characteristics are associated with progressive or "high-performance work organizations." One interpretation of this is that internships are an integral part of a broad human resource strategy, suggesting that as (or if) firms move towards more progressive strategies, employer recruitment will become easier.

We looked at the distribution of participating and non-participating establishments by three sectors—private for-profit, private not-for-profit, and public. The most striking finding is that just under half of the participating establishments are for profit while they account for 90 percent of the comparison firms. While not-for-profit and public sector organizations could certainly be motivated by the cost savings potentially associated with work-based learning, it is reasonable that appeals to such organizations to "help out" the community or the local school system might be more effective than such appeals would be to profit-making firms. On the other hand, not-for-profits in particular are often very short of cash, and interns might be particularly attractive as cheap labor. Cash constraints may simply make it impossible to hire additional employees, so such organizations may be faced with the choice of taking an unpaid intern or doing without anyone. Indeed, unpaid internships are very much over-represented among the not-for-profit participants.

Looking for another perspective on the possible motivation of employers, we asked employers to compare various skill categories for interns and "entry-level" workers. In all cases, a majority of the respondents suggested that the skills of the interns were at least as good as those of other entry-level workers, although on average, more employers said that they preferred the regular workers. Nevertheless, the majority of firms that use interns do not perceive that that they are compromising on skill levels. Indeed, more of the respondents preferred the "attitudes" of interns to the attitudes of other workers. Further, using less-skilled interns still may be in the interest of the firms if the wages and costs are lower, or if they expect the interns to stay longer and eventually learn more skills.

We also compared employer attitudes about the skills of their interns. Employers who pay their interns have much more positive views about their interns than employers who don't pay. Indeed, on average, employers who pay report that the interns have better attendance, reliability, and attitude than the alternative workers. This suggests either that firms that pay their interns may be more selective in choosing their interns, or that pay has a positive effect on the behavior of interns.

Finally, we asked participants to identify the most important factor that motivated them to participate. More than half claimed some philanthropic reason. Almost 26 percent cited an interest in contributing to the community as their primary motivation, and almost 33 percent stated that their most important reason was a desire to improve the public education system. Nevertheless, over 41 percent still identified some self-interested reason as their primary basis for participation. Not surprisingly, private not-for-profit and public-sector participants were much more likely than for-profit participants to cite philanthropic motivations. While the participants emphasized philanthropic motivations, over three-quarters of the nonparticipants hypothetically looked to internships for self-interested reasons. These comparisons should be made with caution since the answers for participants are based on experience while those for the nonparticipants are hypothetical.

While the appropriate behavioral model that underlies these results is not clear, they do suggest that experience with interns does not improve employer attitudes about their potential productivity. Indeed, participants are actually much more concerned than nonparticipants about students' lack of basic skills (27 percent list this as their biggest concern) and their unreliability or immaturity (which most concerns 22 percent). This conclusion is further supported by an in-depth study of one of our survey sites that demonstrated a high attrition rate for employer participants. Indeed, half of all of the employers who participated in the program between 1984 and 1995 participated for only one internship cycle (Wieler and Bailey, 1997).

We also find that both participating and non-participating employers are much more concerned about the indirect costs of training students than they are about the direct costs of paying students (though it should be mentioned that only about half of the internships are paid). The theoretical work on participation emphasizes that employers may have little incentive to train interns since they may fear that the interns, once trained, will leave. This does appear to be a preoccupation of the nonparticipants but not the participants.

It appears that philanthropic motivations still outweigh a bottom-line perspective. Although the data are certainly open to interpretation, it is hard to argue from this evidence that most firms are participating out of a conviction that it will advance their business in any direct way. However, for-profit nonparticipants say that they will have to be convinced that participation will

be in their firms' interests. On an optimistic note, our data indicate that this may be less difficult if there is a strong general trend towards more progressive human resource practices.

QUALITY OF WORK-BASED LEARNING

Our survey allows some measurement of the quality of the work-based learning experiences in these five programs. One measure is the type of occupation the interns are placed in. The most important finding is that the internships are not concentrated in retail, the traditional youth-employing sector. The majority of the internships are in the service sector, in a diverse group of occupations that includes health, education, and business services. Nearly half of the internships are in administrative support positions—entry-level jobs in office and business employment. Interns are also over-represented in technical occupations, while relatively few are in production-machine operative positions—another area of youth concentration. Thus, programs are not relying on the typical youth jobs. The overrepresentation in technical jobs is encouraging since employers often have difficulty filling these positions; some employers may be using school-to-work internships to strengthen their pool of available labor.

Program Characteristics. The survey asked about a number of program components that are often considered part of the school-to-work model. Each of these components is believed to strengthen the quality of a work-based learning effort. The data indicate that the large majority of participating firms provide a mentor and claim to document and assess student learning on the job. Internships in a majority of the participating organizations also involve a written agreement between the student and the school, and the rotation of students among several positions. In contrast, far fewer employers engage in active participation with the schools—only a quarter have staff make presentations at the school, a fifth provide classrooms at the work site, and fewer than one-sixth of participants sit on an advisory board to the program.

Internship Duration and Learning Time. Our other measures of program quality include the duration of the internships, the amount of time it takes the intern to learn the assigned job, and the percentage of the internship spent learning. The amount of time that it takes to learn the job is a measure of the amount of learning represented by the placement. Clearly, there is less educational benefit in a job that can be learned in a day than one that takes a month. Since internships potentially take time away from other educational experiences, such as doing homework or participating in extra-curricular activities, as much time as possible during the internship should be spent learning.

We found that, on average, the internships last almost 23 weeks, it takes 14 days to learn the jobs, and the interns spend about 14 percent of the time on the job learning. Compared to unpaid internships, paid placements are strongest on all measures of internship quality. The quality measures are also higher for those firms who intend to hire their interns. The government sites have the highest program intensity, an index measuring the number of program components, but the internship jobs in the private for-profit sector score highest on the learning-time variable.

Regression analyses suggest that public and non-profit organizations and those that hire permanently tend to provide higher-quality internships; however, the not-for-profits have internships with the shortest learning times. It may be that non-profits in particular try to provide good learning experiences and therefore tend to follow program guidelines by introducing the types of practices measured by the intensity variable. On the other hand, the nature of the jobs that they have available may not allow them to give interns positions that have an inherently high learning content. The regression analyses indicate that firms that pay their interns score higher in terms of the internships' learning times, yet the relationship between quality and whether the internship is paid is not a strong one. Significantly, the size of the organization is not related to any of the measures of quality.

Internships at sites where a college-educated worker would otherwise perform the work score lower on these quality measures than at sites where a worker with a high school or two-year-college education would otherwise do the work. This suggests that internships are best at sites where students are not too far behind other workers, rather than sites where the skill differentials are so great that students do separate work entirely. Not seeing the interns as potentially productive workers in their assigned tasks, the employers may pay less attention to them. The jobs that could otherwise be filled with workers without a high school degree also tend to score lower on the quality measures. These are probably typical teenage jobs that offer few opportunities to learn. Thus, this analysis suggests that internships are most productive when they involve jobs in which the interns could realistically be expected to be productive, but that still demand skills and abilities that the interns do not already have.

We reported above that firms that provided more training for their workers and that had more progressive human resource practices (associated with "high performance work organizations") were more likely to provide work-based learning. The data indicate that firms that engaged in these practices also provided higher-quality internships (on all of our measures except the ratio of learning time to program duration).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The programs that we studied have been able to recruit an adequate number of employers and in some cases have been able to sustain a high number of participants for many years. Moreover, for the most part, these have not been in the traditional youth-employing sectors and occupations—service occupations in the retail sector.

Furthermore, participation in these programs does seem to be associated with a cluster of progressive human resource and training practices. Not only are firms that use these practices more likely to participate, but there is evidence that they provide higher-quality internships. This suggests that employer recruitment may become

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easier if these practices spread, even if participation itself is not necessarily in the direct short-term interest of employers.

The data suggest that, although a substantial minority of firms report that bottom-line-oriented reasons are the most important motivations for their participation, for most employers the chief motivation remains philanthropic. The importance of a philanthropic emphasis is supported both by answers to direct questions as well as the pattern of characteristics in the comparison of participating and non-participating firms. While these motivations have clearly carried these programs a long way, firms in the non-participating sample indicate that they would need more bottom-line-oriented arguments to convince them to join.

There is also evidence that firms tend to provide higher quality programs (at least as indicated by our measures) when they expect the interns to stay at the firm. Although these types of internships are better on all of the quality measures, sometimes the differences are not statistically significant. Internships with firms that emphasize philanthropic motivations score lower on the quality measures based on training time, while they score higher on the intensity measure.

Our findings and analysis have several implications for future research and program development. We clearly need more comprehensive analyses of the costs and benefits of participation in school-to-work internship programs. It will become increasingly important to have good data and arguments to support the claim that participation is in the interest of the firm. The recent set of eight case studies of the costs and benefits of participation by the National Employer Leadership Council and the American Society of Training and Development (Bassi et al., 1997) is a step in the right direction, but more of this type of work is needed. As programs grow, appeals to community service will be less and less effective. It follows also that program policies that reduce the cost to employers and facilitate participation will become increasingly important. But an over-emphasis on steps to make it easier for employers to participate could run the risk of promoting excess selectivity for interns, thus barring many students who might particularly benefit from internships from higher-quality opportunities.

The growth of these programs and the wide variation in the educational value of work-based learning experiences suggest that it is time for program developers to pay more attention to the quality of internships. First, we need better measures of quality. Although we used four measures of program quality in this study, we did not measure the content or outcomes of the experience. A fundamental problem is a lack of good conceptualizations of what an internship should provide.

According to our measures, internships appear to work best if they are tied more directly to work preparation than to educational preparation. To the extent that school-to-work programs at the secondary school level de-emphasize direct preparation for work and increase their emphasis on preparation for postsecondary education, our data indicate that the quality of the programs will be an increasing problem. On the other hand, employers probably do not have a good sense of how the work-based learning experience contributes to the interns' education, broadly defined, so employer-reported measures of quality cannot be expected to capture these aspects of the experience.

This reinforces the argument for better conceptions of internship quality. Indeed, the school-to-work community has only started to confront the issue of work-based learning quality. Program operators have been reluctant to push the issue of quality because of difficulties in recruiting employers, but our data suggest that a substantial number of employers are already providing internships. Given the current levels of participation, program operators appear to have an opportunity to shift some of their focus from recruitment to quality. Moreover, there is no reason to conclude yet that research and experimentation with work-based learning will not lead to the development of approaches that will have both strong educational value and be practical in a wide variety of different employment environments.

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